

Uwe Meixner

# No Life without Time

## 1 Concepts of existence

In order to make the point of this paper, some preparations – explications and distinctions – are necessary. The first concern is the concept of *existence*. In fact, there is more than one such concept. There is a semantical concept of existence, and several ontological ones. The many concepts of existence are not always carefully distinguished.

According to the semantical concept of existence (which is precisely the concept of existence employed in so-called “free logic”, but only in non-quantified contexts), “N exists” means as much as “N’ refers to something” (for example, “Pegasus exists” means as much as “Pegasus’ refers to something”). Given the semantical concept of existence, true negative singular existence statements offer no particular problem: “Pegasus does not exist” is true because “Pegasus” does not refer to anything; “The present king of France does not exist” is true because “the present king of France” does not refer to anything. However, the semantical concept of existence cannot be *the* (only) concept of existence. This is so because “exist” is, according to the semantical concept of existence, a predicate of *names* (contrary appearances notwithstanding), not a predicate of non-linguistic objects, and because we usually *do* intend “exist” to be a predicate of non-linguistic objects (that is: we usually do intend it to be a predicate *properly speaking*, a *real* predicate).

The ontological concepts of existence are characterizable without speaking about – without referring in any way to – singular terms. There are two ontological concepts of existence: (1) The (real) predicate “x exists” may mean as much as “x is [identical to] *something*”; this interpretation of “exist” is used, for example, in the following statement: “Some possible world exists which is not merely possible, and some possible worlds exist which are merely possible.” (2) The (real) predicate “x exists” may mean as much as “x is [identical to something which is] *actual*”; this other interpretation of “exist” is used in the following statement: “Some possible world exists and, consequently, it is not merely possible, and some possible worlds do not exist and, consequently, they are merely possible.”

Of the two concepts of existence, the second one (described in (2)) is far more interesting than the first (described in (1)); for according to the first concept, it is a logically necessary truth that everything exists. If it is logically necessary that everything exists, then true negative singular existence statements can only be

had if (a) one allows that names may name nothing – which is contrary to classical logic – and if (b) one switches to the semantical concept of existence at least in singular existence statements – which is an *ad hoc* measure in view of the fact that singular existence statements, whether positive or negative, are, as a rule, intended to have an ontological meaning.

Moreover, the intended ontological meaning of singular existence statements is, usually, not the one which is in accordance with the first concept of existence; rather, it is the one which is in accordance with the second. “I exist”, uttered by me, has an ontological meaning; but does “I exist” mean that I am (identical to) *something* (namely, myself)? It does not; for otherwise I, for one, would not be ready to add “but I might not have existed” to “I exist”. It is logically impossible that *I – this person – am not* (identical to) *something*; it is only possible that *I am not* (identical to something which is) *actual*. I do not change the meaning of the word “exist” from one sentence to the next, and I do not wish to assert falsehoods. Thus, in saying “I exist, but I might not have existed” I am either saying that I am actual and might not have been actual, or I am saying that I am something and might not have been something. And the first has the considerable advantage of being possibly true.

## 2 Actuality

Actuality is a close companion of possibility. Actuality logically includes possibility. In fact, actuality can be defined on the basis of *possibility* and *mere possibility* as follows: *x* is actual if, and only if, *x* is possible, but not merely possible. If existence is identified with actuality, then many true negative singular existence statements offer, again, no particular problem: “Being a unicorn does not exist” is true because the property of being a unicorn is not actual, in other words: because no instance of it is actual; “The state of affairs that the sun revolves around the earth does not exist” is true because that state of affairs is not actual, in other words: it does not obtain, it is not a fact. “The assassination of Hitler does not exist” is true because that event is not actual, in other words: because it did never happen. What philosophers often balk at are *nonactual individuals* (in the narrow sense): individuals (narrowly conceived, therefore non-events) which are merely possible or even impossible. Philosophers who reject nonactual individuals do not wish to be “Meinongians”. The discussion of Meinongianism is not a concern of this paper. Let me just say that I find nothing particularly objectionable in nonactual (or,

for that matter, *nonexistent*)<sup>1</sup> individuals as long as one identifies them with the merely possible individuals;<sup>2</sup> *impossible* individuals (individuals that *cannot* be actual), which *full* Meinongians accept (thus moving beyond possibilism), I do find ontologically problematic and somewhat hard to defend.

I move on to considerations regarding actuality which are more important in the present context than Meinongianism. *Actuality* is one-sidedly entailed by *consciousness* and by *aliveness*; aliveness, in turn, is one-sidedly entailed by consciousness. In other words: Necessarily, nothing is alive or conscious which is not actual, but not vice versa; necessarily, nothing is conscious which is not alive, but not vice versa.<sup>3</sup> Now, the basic assumption of this paper is that there is no such thing as *timeless* consciousness, aliveness, and actuality; actuality, aliveness, and consciousness are *essentially time-related*.

### 3 Three ways of time-relatedness

There are three ways of time-relatedness: (i) time-relatedness via individual reference, (ii) time-relatedness via quantificational reference, and (iii) indexical time-relatedness. The essential time-relatedness of *aliveness*, for example (the same point could also be made *mutatis mutandis* with respect to *consciousness* and *actuality*), consists in the following: In every interpretation of the predicate “*x* is alive” which is consistent with its basic sense, the predicate “*x* is alive” must be understood in one (and only one) of the following three ways:

- (i) “*x* is alive at  $\tau$ ” (where “ $\tau$ ” stands for a non-indexical singular term that refers to a particular time-point or to a particular set of time-points);
- (ii) “For some  $\tau$ : *x* is alive at  $\tau$ ” (where “ $\tau$ ” stands for a variable that runs over time-points, or non-empty sets of time-points, or both over time-points and non-empty sets of time-points);

---

<sup>1</sup> I note in passing that Meinong identified existence and actuality; this is the identification which I, too, would recommend if one wished to have a predicate of existence at one’s disposal which is *not* ambiguous.

<sup>2</sup> See my defense of possibilism in Meixner (2006).

<sup>3</sup> The following is also true: Necessarily, nothing is actual or possible which is not (identical to) something, *but not vice versa* (the state of affairs that  $2 + 2 = 5$  is something, but it is neither actual nor possible); necessarily, nothing is actual which is not possible, *but not vice versa* (the state of affairs that U.M. is never born is possible, but it is not actual). By putting two shorter chains of one-sided entailment together, we obtain the following longer chain of one-sided entailment (one with a *central link*):  $x$  is conscious  $\rightarrow x$  is alive  $\rightarrow x$  is actual  $\rightarrow x$  is possible  $\rightarrow x$  is something.

(iii) “ $x$  is *now* (*presently, currently*) alive”.

The ways of the essential time-relatedness of *aliveness* will be of help in analyzing more complex ways of essential time-relatedness which do not concern *aliveness* properly speaking but are still in the vicinity of it, for example, the time-relatedness expressed by “ $x$  was alive”: “For some  $t$ :  $t$  was present before *now* and  $x$  is alive at  $t$ ”; or the time-relatedness expressed by “ $x$  is still alive”: “ $x$  is *now* alive and for some  $t$ :  $t$  was present before *now* and  $x$  is alive at  $t$  and for every  $t'$  which is such that  $t$  was present before  $t'$  and  $t'$ , in turn, was present before *now*:  $x$  is alive at  $t'$ ”.

All these remarks can, of course, also be applied to consciousness and actuality.<sup>4</sup> If the essential time-relatedness of actuality, consciousness, aliveness is explicitly specified in one or the other of the three ways pointed out above, then the entailment-chain “ $x$  is conscious  $\rightarrow x$  is alive  $\rightarrow x$  is actual” (established in the previous section) needs to be adapted accordingly: (i) “ $x$  is conscious at  $\tau \rightarrow x$  is alive at  $\tau \rightarrow x$  is actual at  $\tau$ ”; (ii) “For some  $\tau$ :  $x$  is conscious  $\rightarrow$  For some  $\tau$ :  $x$  is alive  $\rightarrow$  For some  $\tau$ :  $x$  is actual”; (iii)  $x$  is *now* (*presently, currently*) conscious  $\rightarrow x$  is *now* (*presently, currently*) alive  $\rightarrow x$  is *now* (*presently, currently*) actual”.

## 4 The living God

After the preparations in the preceding three sections, I now turn to the main concern of this paper. It is a central teaching of Christianity – in all of its different versions – that God is a “living God”. What does that mean? Whatever it means, it is certainly meant to entail the proposition that God is *now* alive (and therefore *now* actual). This is, in fact, what every Christian believes; every single prayer attests to

---

<sup>4</sup> However, here is a reason for doubting that *actuality* is essentially time-related: What about the actuality of *abstract* entities, the actuality of numbers, concepts, propositions? Is not at least *their* actuality *timeless*? The objection is interesting if, and only if, some entities are abstract (which is true if, and only if, *necessarily* some entities are abstract; the truth (if it is a truth) that some entities are abstract is not contingent). Assuming that some entities are abstract, there are two plausible ways to react to the objection: (A) One denies that any abstract entity is actual; one asserts that, necessarily, every abstract entity is something (and therefore – qua something – existent), but that, also necessarily, no abstract entity is actual. (B) One asserts that, for abstract entities, the predicate “ $x$  is actual” – which still means the same as either “ $x$  is actual at  $\tau$ ”, or “For some  $\tau$ :  $x$  is actual at  $\tau$ ”, or “ $x$  is *now* (*presently, currently*) actual” – and the predicate “ $x$  is (identical to) something” are logically equivalent; in this way, actuality is still essentially time-related, but its time-relatedness has become trivial.

this belief – as well as to the belief that God is *now* conscious and *now* actual (and is not a mere possibility). Now, if there were no Time,<sup>5</sup> it would not be true that God is *now* actual, and not true that God is actual at some time, and not true that God is actual at time  $\tau$ ; and it would not be true that God is *now* alive, or at some time alive, or alive at time  $\tau$ ; and it would not be true that God is *now*, or at some time, or at time  $\tau$  conscious. The actuality, aliveness, consciousness of God depends on the existence of Time. This dependence is a *sine-qua-non* (or *negative*) dependence; it is also – in view of the essential time-relatedness of actuality, aliveness, and consciousness – an *essential* (or *necessary*) dependence: God cannot – *absolutely* cannot – be actual, alive, or conscious without the existence of Time. Thus, if Time did not exist, then, as a necessary – *absolutely* necessary – consequence, God would neither be conscious, nor alive, nor actual, and one might as well say: he would not exist. If, however, actuality, aliveness, and consciousness are properties which God necessarily has (believers usually take actuality, aliveness, and consciousness to be such properties), then, as a necessary consequence, Time exists just as necessarily as God himself exists necessarily in virtue of his necessarily having those properties.

Obviously, an important question must be answered in order to make the assertions in the previous paragraph fully intelligible: What does it mean *that Time exists*? (If we come to know this, we will, of course, also know what it means *that Time does not exist*.) Minimally, *that Time exists* means that Time is *something* – where, necessarily, Time is (identical to) *something* if and only if Time is the set of (all) time-points. This necessary bi-conditional is no great surprise, because Time just necessarily is the set of time-points.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, and rather less minimally, *that Time exists* means that Time is *actual* – where, necessarily, Time is *actual* if and only if (a) Time (the set of time-points) is non-empty and (b) every time-point was, is (*now*), or will be *present*.

There can be no doubt that Time exists in the sense of Time being actual, and, at the same time, there can be no doubt that the mere assertion “Time is actual” is still far from providing a full ontological description of Time – the above analysis of its actuality notwithstanding. Such a full description will not be provided in this paper.<sup>7</sup> However, here are two additional details about Time which are of

---

<sup>5</sup> I write the word “time” with a capital “T” wherever it serves as a proper name with honorific character.

<sup>6</sup>  $N(a = b \supset \exists x(a = x))$  is a logical truth, and if  $N(a = b)$  is true, then  $N(\exists x(a = x) \supset a = b)$  is also true (as a trivial modal-logical consequence). It follows (by elementary modal logic): if  $N(a = b)$  is true, then  $N(\exists x(a = x) \equiv a = b)$  is true.

<sup>7</sup> More can be found in Meixner (1997) and Meixner (2010).

particular importance for the purposes of this paper: (A) The time-points in Time constitute a strict linear order (an order which is structurally just like the order constituted by the elements in any set of real numbers). (B) Each time-point in Time becomes present – singly – and ceases to be present in a succession inexorably proceeding in one single direction along the linear order of Time. Thus, Time is not only actual in the above-defined sense; it is, moreover, (i) always true for all time-points  $t$  and  $t'$  in Time that  $t'$  was, is or will be present before  $t$  if and only if  $t'$  is before  $t$  (that is, *timelessly* before  $t$  in the linear order of Time), and (ii) always true that every time-point in Time is present only once,<sup>8</sup> and (iii) always true that exactly one time-point in Time is present.

## 5 The main worry, and why one need not worry

The main worry is a *theological* worry. If God depended on Time (in the above-described way), would this not make God ontologically dependent on Creation? The ontological dependence of God on Creation would be a highly heterodox consequence, a consequence which should not be accepted, I believe. But how can this consequence be avoided *without* denying that God depends on Time?

There are, basically, two ways of avoiding God's dependence on Creation while accepting his dependence on Time:

- (I) Time itself is not created; it is an uncreated part of Creation.
- (II) There is uncreated Time and created time; the latter is a part of Creation, the former is not.

Consider solution (I) to the difficulty: According to it, there is just *one* time. The time on which God is dependent is an uncreated part of his essence and at the same time an uncreated part of Creation. Since Time is uncreated, *God does not depend on Creation by depending on Time* (although Time is indeed a part of Creation – but not a created one). Consider solution (II) to the difficulty: According to it, there are *two* times. The time on which God is dependent is an uncreated part of his essence; the other time is created time, a created part of Creation. God does not depend on created time, he only depends on uncreated Time – which, however, is not a part of Creation; therefore, again, *God does not depend on Creation by depending on Time*.

---

<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is always (that is: was always, is now, and will always be) the case that any time-point  $t$  in Time which is present was never present already and will never be present again.

Prima facie it might be thought that both solutions contradict divine simplicity because they both take Time to be a part of God's essence. For rebutting this objection, it is necessary to introduce a further distinction. The essence of God *in the narrow sense* is simple. It is the essence God is identical to, as (for example) Thomas Aquinas taught. The essence of God *in the wide sense* is the essence of God in the narrow sense *plus* whatever proceeds ("flows") *per se* (or *eo ipso*) from God's essence in the narrow sense. The essence of God in the wide sense is *not* identical to God; rather, it is identical to *God and his divine life*. If Time is asserted to be "a part of God's essence", then it is, within theological reason, merely asserted to be a part of God's essence *in the wide sense* (namely, in virtue of being a part of what proceeds *per se* from God's essence in the narrow sense); it is not asserted to be a part of God's essence in the narrow sense. For it could not be a part of God's essence in the narrow sense: the essence of God in the narrow sense – being God himself – has no (proper) parts.

The problem with solution (I) is that many theologically interested philosophers, or philosophically interested theologians, are uncomfortable with uncreated parts of Creation.<sup>9</sup> However, are not numbers and universals uncreated parts of Creation? Was not Christ in his divine nature an uncreated part of Creation? If there are no uncreated parts of Creation, then what good reasons are there for us to assume that there is *anything uncreated* beyond so-called Creation? And what good reasons, then, are there for us to assume *anything* about the nature of *the uncreated* allegedly beyond so-called Creation? A perfectly analogical situation in a quite different area of philosophy may serve to highlight the force of the latter two questions: Epistemologists assumed in the past – and many of them still assume – that in cognition we only deal with *representations*. However, if we only deal with representations, then what good reasons are there for us to assume that there is *anything* beyond the so-called representations: something which they represent? And what good reasons, then, are there for us to assume *anything* about the nature of *the something* allegedly beyond the so-called representations?

The problem with solution (II) is that we certainly seem to be talking only about *one* time, not about *two* times, even when speaking about God. And if there were two times after all, one for God and another for us (at least in this world), *what* would be the relation between the two times? This seems to be a question which is not worth the effort of trying to find a plausible answer to it – because it seems unavoidable that the effort is spent in vain. This, if true, would reflect rather negatively on solution (II); it would be a serious drawback to it. However,

---

<sup>9</sup> In Christianity, this is mainly true of the western tradition. The eastern tradition is rather more accepting of uncreated parts of Creation: see Bradshaw (2004), 207–220, 232–238.

since there is a causal relation between God and Creation, one possible answer to the posed, supposedly “embarrassing” question is the following: The two times are related like *game-time* and *player-time*. The state  $S'$  of a game (for example, of a chess-game) follows *in game-time* the state  $S$  of the game if and only if the action that produces  $S'$  follows *in player-time* the action that produces  $S$ . Let this bi-conditional define the relationship between game-time and player-time; for the purposes of this paper, no further assumptions are necessary. Note that a large amount of player-time may pass between the two actions which produce two states of the game that are immediately consecutive to each other in game-time (every chess-player knows this). It is also conceivable that a lot of game-time passes between two game-states, with many and various *purely rule-determined* (in other words, purely *law-determined*) game-states in between the two, while the two actions which produce “truly significant change” at the beginning and at the end of the process – because they produce the two game-states in question – are immediately consecutive to each other in player-time.

Obviously, created time corresponds to game-time, uncreated Time to player-time. The idea is certainly not implausible and not without merits.<sup>10</sup> What inclines me nevertheless to reject solution (II) and to accept solution (I) – which, to repeat, is based on the assumption, on the idea that there is only one time, at once an uncreated part of God’s essence and an uncreated part of Creation – is a fact of *lived religion*, a fact which neither philosophy nor theology can sidestep: When believers speak of *the living God*, they certainly mean that God is now living *in their time*. In fact, that God is now living *in our time* appears to be one of the messages of God’s self-definition in *Exodus* 3, 14: God tells Moses that he, God, is “the I-am”. By this, he did not mean to say “I am the *I-am-like-the-natural-numbers-are*”. And he did not mean to say “I am *the I-am-in-my-own-sweet-time*”. He meant to say “I am *the-I-am-now-in-your-time-and-in-mine*”.

If Time is at once an uncreated part of God’s essence and an uncreated part of Creation, then we – created beings – partake in every moment of our conscious existence ontologically and cognitively of God’s uncreated essence. We should not forget this.

---

<sup>10</sup> It is treated in detail in Meixner (2010).



## Bibliography

- Bradshaw, D. (2004), *Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meixner, Uwe (1997), The Objectivity of Time-Flux and the Direction of Time, In: J. Faye *et al.* (eds.), *Perspectives on Time*, 107–117. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Meixner, Uwe (2006), *The Theory of Ontic Modalities*, Heusenstamm bei Frankfurt a. M.: Ontos.
- Meixner, Uwe (2010), *Modelling Metaphysics. The Metaphysics of a Model*, Heusenstamm bei Frankfurt a. M.: Ontos.

